

ERNEST LAWSON



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES


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ERNEST LAWSON

BY

GUY PÈNE DU BOIS



AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

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FOREWORD

THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.

For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish to acknowledge our indebtedness to The Ferargil Galleries for their help and coöperation in securing photographs of paintings illustrated; and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Nickolas Muray

ERNEST LAWSON

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GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

WHEN thinking of pure landscape painting among contemporaries in America, and even elsewhere, the name of Ernest Lawson has long been the first to come to my mind. Since the death of Corot and the coming of Cézanne, landscape painting has, along with all objective painting, gone out of fashion, just as the feeling of humility toward nature has been wiped out of modern thinking. The artist now goes to nature with a preconceived idea about her. He uses her, moulds her into the form demanded by that idea. He has only in rare, second rate, never convincing instances been an empiricist. Perhaps he has been too moved by art, which has made so much noise in the world recently, to trust his own judgment in a first hand examination of nature. He has been very snobbish about her: a city man in the presence of a peasant maid. He has traveled the countryside with his head so jammed with cosmic thought, universal harmonies, even mechanistic programs that he could get no reaction from her at all. He must, he has felt in the hum of the air about him, avoid becoming a simple man above all things. Nature has rarely been seen with a naked eye. Perhaps there are no unfilmed eyes. But in Lawson the liking for the countryside, for its light and air and form is without compromise, a simple thing. It is pure because it is not tortured into symbolical shapes by the ruthless requirements of a philosophical or scientific doctrine.

With John Twachman who was his first important instructor or J. Alden Weir who was the second, landscape painting, which they both practiced delightfully, as subject matter, was subjugated, given a kind of second place, by their own (Twachman's particularly) predetermination to employ the science of the Impressionists. Their landscape was

under this major force as it might have been under a haze. Form got somehow lost in it. Composition or organization, as we say now, always most considered when form comes into the reckoning, was, with them, neglected. They were as though they had found a way of talking, had brought this back with them, as they actually did, from their travels, a long way, and must protect it against any intrusion in this land where it was so little known and even when known disparaged. But this may be a too broad statement. Perhaps the kind of mirage quality in the painting of both of these men was the product of the super-refined aesthetic notions of the time in which they lived. One of the most popular landscape painters of that period, D. W. Tryon, usually hid his forms, meticulously as they were painted, under a morning haze or an evening mist, while his counterpart among the figure painters, T. W. Dewing, was creating slim ladies on little panels who could never have had any but spiritual thoughts at any time in their lives. Silver point, the faintest and most elusive of all mediums, was very much in vogue. Aestheticians prattled about delicacy. Artists were exquisite. The realization of the weight and richness of matter in paint or stone was considered vulgar. Life in any of its material aspects was left unmentioned by artists.

Twachtman and Weir fitted quite easily into this envelope. While not of those who affected gentleness, they were still very gentle. Man rarely steps out of his period. But their Impressionist science, of which Twachtman retained the color without the *points* and Weir the *points* without the color, and its demand for a reproduction of the vibrations of light and air, combined, if you like, with the incontrovertible influence of current aesthetic ideals, was certainly an obstacle put in the way of their realization of form. This they could make us see but dimly even in their most successful canvases. Theirs was rather an art of suggestion. They put forth little samples of their thoughts written down in half completed sentences, projections of lyrical poets—they are always young—mystical, retiring and a little afraid that if they did too consistently cross the t and

dot the i the obviousness of the result would become unbearable, would be vulgar, that last crime in their world. Lawson himself, under them, must have begun rather timidly. The first picture he showed to Weir at Cos Cob brought out "I've never seen so bad a picture." He had gone into details, been literal. But the earliest pictures we know from him are as veiled and suggestive as Twachtman's. These are rare. Their period could not have been of long duration.

He studied later at Julian's Academy in Paris under those powerful Academicians of that day Jean Paul Laurens and Benjamin Constant. The massier of his class was, curiously enough, Henri Bataille. (A lot of writers have started off in the wrong boat.) In 1894 he exhibited at the Salon des Artistes Français. This was the first time anywhere. The first in America, 1897, was at the National Academy of Design. These were the tentative beginnings. I should say that his first important appearance anywhere was with that famous group exhibition, called *The Eight Americans* in parody of *The Ten Americans* of which both Weir and Twachtman were members, held at the Macbeth Gallery about 1908. This was epoch making. A bull had crashed into a dainty drawing room and, not satisfied with this indignity, bellowed. The lovers of the gentle national painting of that day were beside themselves. They had had their first view of realism, of the realism of Daumier, Courbet, Lautrec, Degas and Ibels. Art has gone further than the lengths to which even these Frenchmen brought it since, to greater vulgarities in any case. It is difficult now to realize that this particular show could have been considered so shocking. Of the men in it, Robert Henri, who was the High Priest, George Luks, John Sloan, William Glackens, Arthur B. Davies, Everett Shinn and Maurice Prendergast, Lawson was the only pure landscapist and the only one of them also, at that time, to use the palette of the Impressionists. Whistler, through the old masters, influenced the tone of the exhibition. James Huneker called it *darkest Henri*. Lawson's color, in any case, sang against this background. And, which is far more impor-

tant, his form subsisted. There was no coldness, no fragile, delicate wistfulness in the comparative pallor of his color.

These men all talked in plain terms. The artist had not yet become a conscious philosopher and scientist. The Henri group talked of life, wanted it raw as possible, mistrusted veneers of any kind and especially social ones. They felt themselves prophets, pioneers in an environment crowded with those thin beauties beloved of weaklings who seek in art an escape from the common heritage. Lawson may have seemed a little idyllic here, though Prendergast and Davies were present, a little inclined to dwell on nature's splendours. He did dwell on them . . . but naturally, easily, honestly. It is here that I keep thinking of him as the pure landscape painter. He is of the type. He belongs with Corot, as I have said of his very great friend William Glackens, a man to whom nature in her more pastoral aspects, especially in these, reveals her secrets. I cannot, for example, imagine Lawson sitting before a landscape armed with a preconception. He would be much more likely to be found sitting before her working, working as it might seem dumbly, and hoping that he may be able to realize the wonder before him. When Corot had painted a good picture he would explain that God had sent him little angels. Lawson must feel this way too. Indeed he said just the other day of one of his greatest pictures the "Vanishing Mist," which has the lyric peace and quality of a Giorgione, "I don't know how that happened." It is one of the greatest American landscapes.

Accident must play a part in much of his work. He talks very little about art, seems to be shorn of the usual art chatter. Showing one of his canvases he will go into raptures about the place at or from which it was painted. He has favorites. He will like the human rather than the austere landscape, seek for little homely nooks, a chicken yard, a boat house on a narrow river, a swimming hole. Recently he spent a season painting Colorado's canyons, mountains and big spaces. Some of these canvases came off. Most of them were thin, barren. "I couldn't feel the

place, that stuff, it was too bleak . . . forbidding," he told me the other day. The majority of his successful canvases have been painted on the Hudson and Harlem Rivers in the neighborhood of Spnyten Duyvil Creek or as it is now called, the Ship Canal.

I can imagine him, again like Corot, painting in a studio surrounded by friends. He is a social person, easy, happy, smiling. The landscape he likes best has been arranged by man, remade, given a human touch. This touch, however, must be slight and, human again, faulty. It cannot have any of the severities of the formal garden nor any of those rigidities which are in the stark frame of a new house. Most of his are ramshackle affairs, adventurer structures, set down where they are by, it must be, squatters, with no thought of permanency, and very little, if any, of beauty. They are houses, a rather flattering word to use on them, put up by men who, living for themselves, cannot be bothered by the thoughts of neighbors. They are too informal even to be classed with those nude barracks which add so much to the ugliness of Sinclair Lewis's Main Street. They seem to have grown in the landscape, to be as much a part of it as the trees. If I have dwelt upon them so much it is because they are a symbol of his approach, a clue to the generally informal nature of the man. It is true that they occupy very little space in the whole Lawson landscape and even in particular pictures are rarely given a dominating position. Indeed in the great landscape which I have mentioned they do not appear at all. But if he gets too far from them, strays at too great a distance from signs of civilization or the marks of cities, he will be lost for subject matter as might a portrait painter.

This human characteristic explains his original alliance with the Eight Americans. It explains the gentle warmth, never suggesting violence, the quietly intimate caress with which so much of his work is enriched. But there are grandeurs in his conceptions. These slip in despite rather than because of the very human original intention. They weave into his work as if by accident. He does not call them in and must himself, finding them

there, at the end of the day's painting, feel something of the thrill accorded by them to others. There is certainly, in this grandeur of his, something of the quality of revelation. This may come only to those sensitive people able to leave themselves open for its reception, with no doors closed, as this means, by an *a priori* premise or willful intention.

The fight between the conceptional and perceptive schools of philosophy or art will be endless. Perhaps it is futile for, if one does not somewhere cross the other, the product will be too shallow, it will be too undocumented in one instance and too matter of fact or uninspired in the other. The conceptional school has become overwhelmingly fashionable because of the demand for individuality raised perhaps by modern life and certainly by modernist aestheticians. Speed figures rather bravely in this demand. It supposes that contemporary man's hurry, the most notorious of all his attributes, can only be arrested by a salient manifestation. He will not hear whisperers. In art he must be caught by compositions as violently constructed as those of bill boards. It is undoubtedly for this reason that there is so much stridency in modern painting. Perhaps, indeed, it need go no further than modern posters do in order to satisfy this modern man in his real or manufactured hurry. A glimpse of any one thing, if the hurry is true, is all he can afford to take. He will be much too short of time for any further investigation. His mind will be too muddled to ask for more than a blatant slogan, or its equivalent, from anything. He will be all enthusiasm for a picture of machinery because he has heard somewhere, in passing, that he lives in a machine age. He will be delighted at the theatre when a preacher, obviously thinking of women's breasts, refers to the mountains of Nebraska because, again in passing, he has heard of psycho-analysis. This portrait of him is pathetic. It must be like the misconceptions of their readers that so many magazine editors make. Men still go fishing. Those of this day cannot be so very different from their brothers of another. Fashionable conclusions make parrots. They do not produce thinking. I am sorry to be so trite. Lawson, I know, does

not bother about these things at all. He makes no effort to stop this mad modern man in his wild rush. He still likes trees and hills and water and houses, that might be the pirate dens of romantic children, for themselves, and can still, within the limits of a fantastic city, listen to the song they sing to him and be content, if you like, when, with the help of another of Corot's little angels, he has been able to record them in that language of paint which he so palpably likes.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ERNEST LAWSON was born in San Francisco in 1873, when his father and mother were on a voyage in his grandfather's clipper ship, which was in the East India trade. His family, of Scotch origin, had moved from New England in 1760 to Nova Scotia, where his parents were born. Mr. Lawson's father, a doctor of medicine, was a naturalized citizen of the United States. After living in Kansas City and Mexico City, Ernest Lawson came to New York in 1890, where he studied at the Art Students' League, later continuing his studies at Cos Cob, Connecticut, with John H. Twachtman and J. Alden Weir.

Although he has traveled to a considerable extent in this country and in France, most of his work has been produced in the neighborhood of New York City, around the Harlem River and Upper Manhattan. For a time he taught at the Broadmoor Art Academy, in Colorado Springs, and the Kansas City Art Institute.

He is a member of the National Academy of Design, the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Arts Club, the Century Association and the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers.

His painting has been shown in all the important national and international exhibitions and has been accorded the following honors: Silver medal, St. Louis Exposition, 1904; Sesnan medal, Pennsylvania Academy, 1907; gold medal A.A.S., 1907; first Hallgarten prize, 1908; gold medal Panama-Pacific Exposition, San Francisco, 1915; Altman prize, National Academy of Design, 1916; second W. A. Clark prize and Corcoran silver medal, 1916; Inness gold medal, National Academy of Design, 1917; Temple gold medal, Pennsylvania Academy, 1920; Altman Prize, National Academy of Design, 1921 and 1928; first prize Pittsburgh International Exposition, 1921; Saltus medal, National Academy of Design, 1930.

He is represented in many private collections and in the following pub-

lic institutions: Art Museum, Montclair, N. J.; Art Institute of Chicago; Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa.; Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences; Butler Art Institute, Youngstown, Ohio; Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pa.; City Art Museum, St. Louis, Mo.; Corcoran Gallery, Washington, D. C.; Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Columbus, Ohio; Detroit Institute of Arts; Engineer's Club, New York City; Fine Arts Society of San Diego; Harrison Gallery, Los Angeles; Kansas City Art Institute; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N. Y.; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D. C.; National Gallery of Canada, Toronto; Newark Museum; Pittsburgh Athletic Club; Public Library, Charleston, West Virginia; Telfair Academy of Arts and Sciences, Savannah, Ga.; Worcester Art Museum; and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N. Y.

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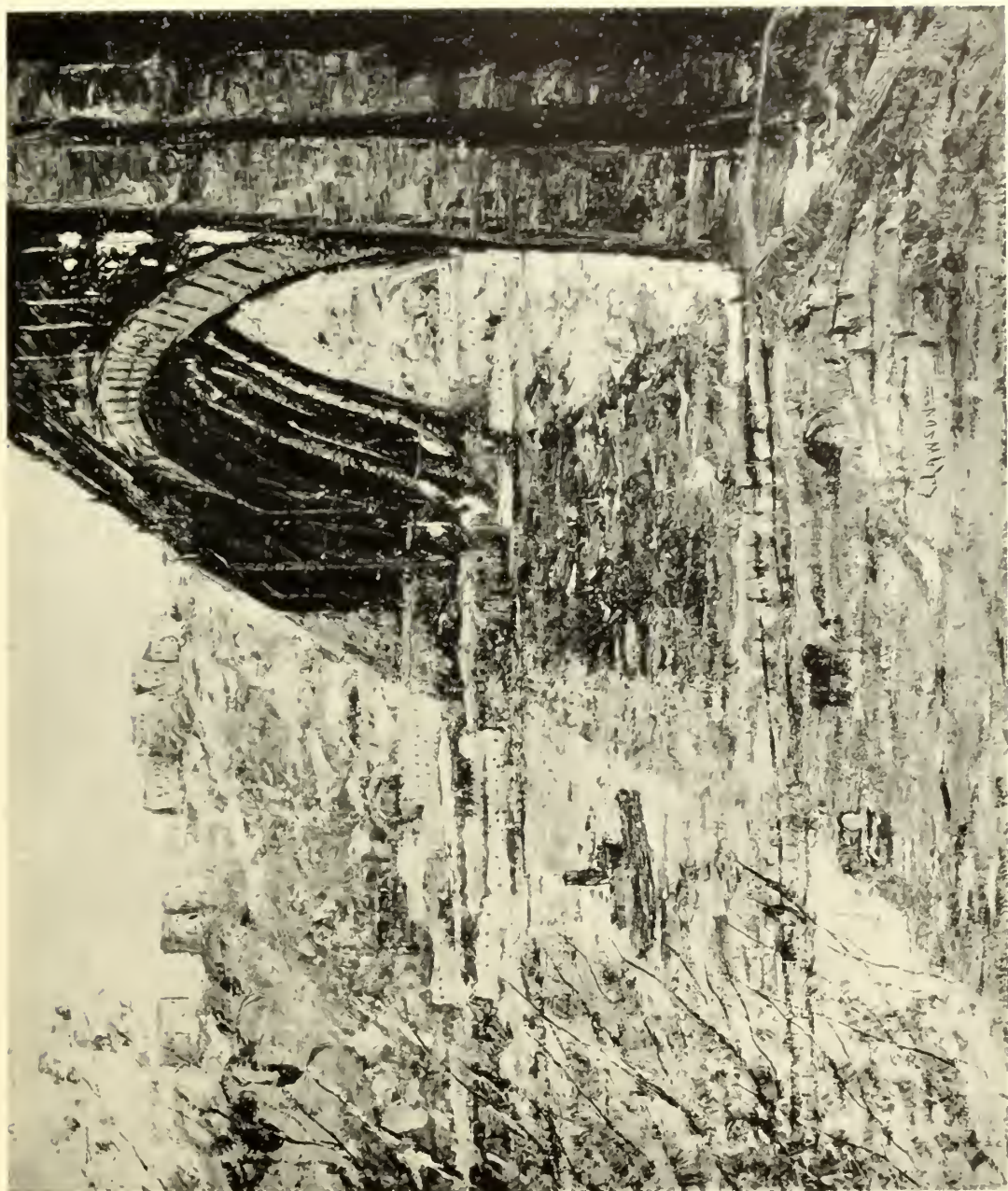
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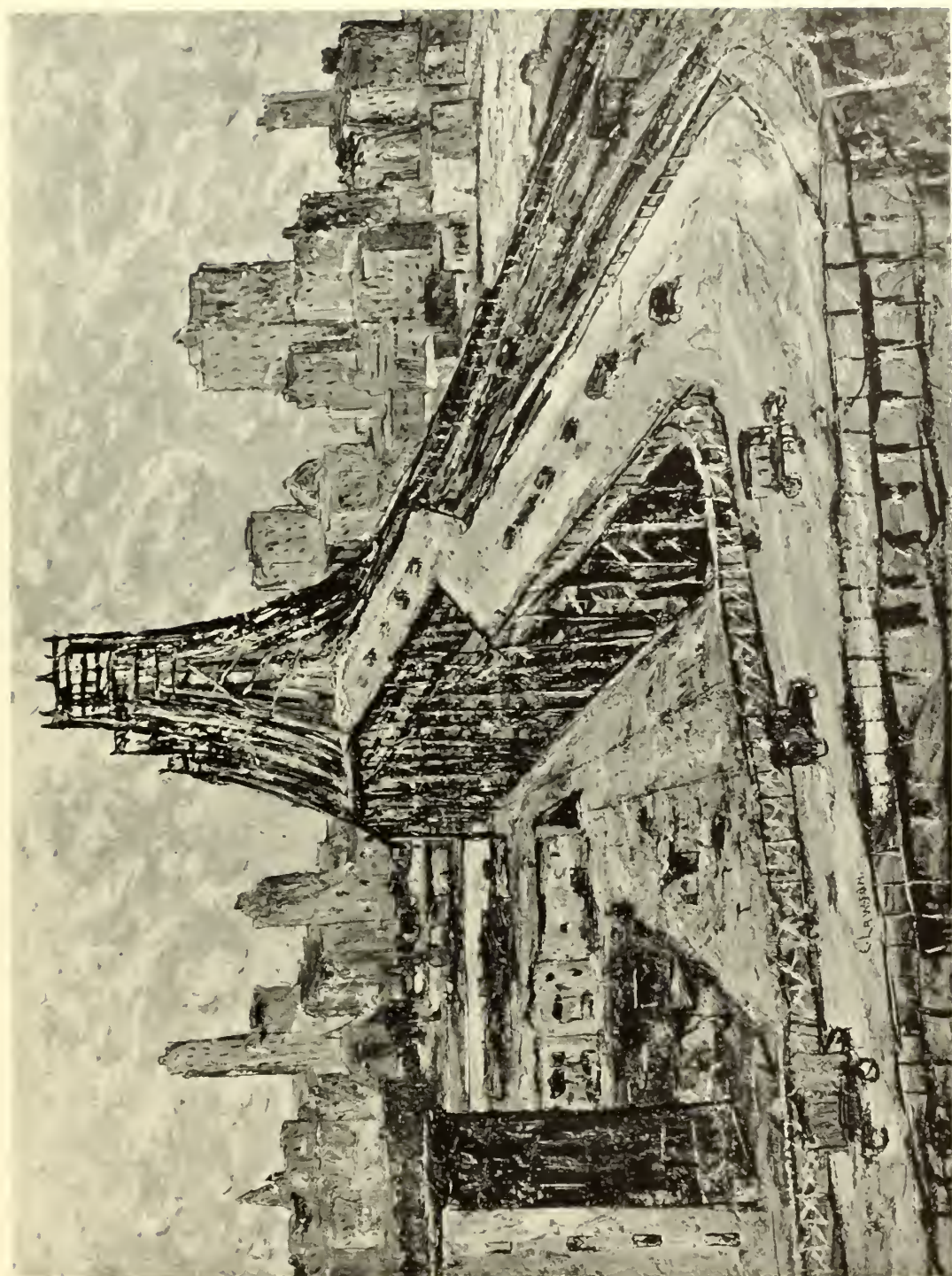
ALONG HARLEM RIVER, 1931

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches



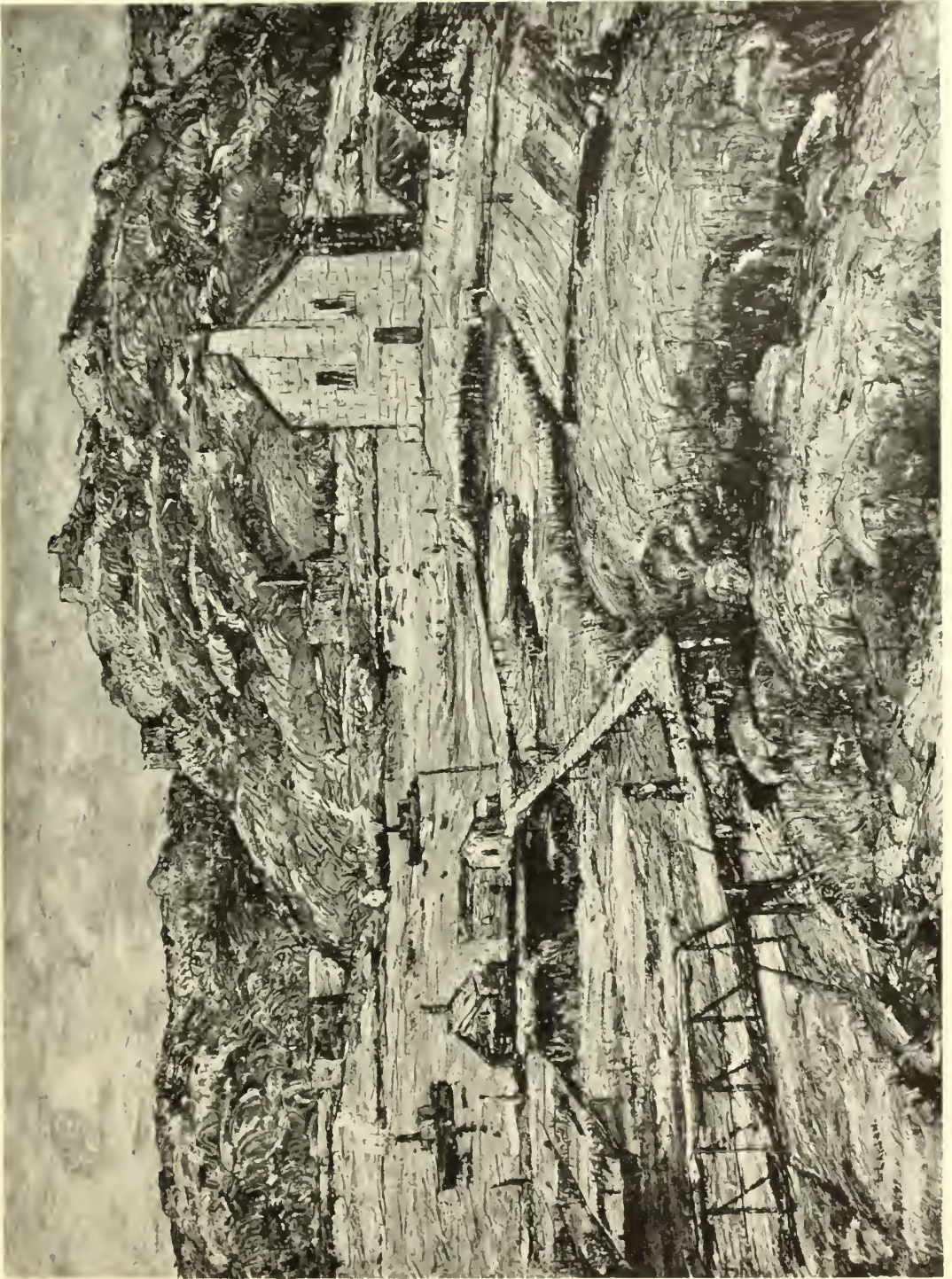
NEW YORK BRIDGE, 1931

h. 30 inches w. 40 inches



BOAT HOUSE WALK, 1931

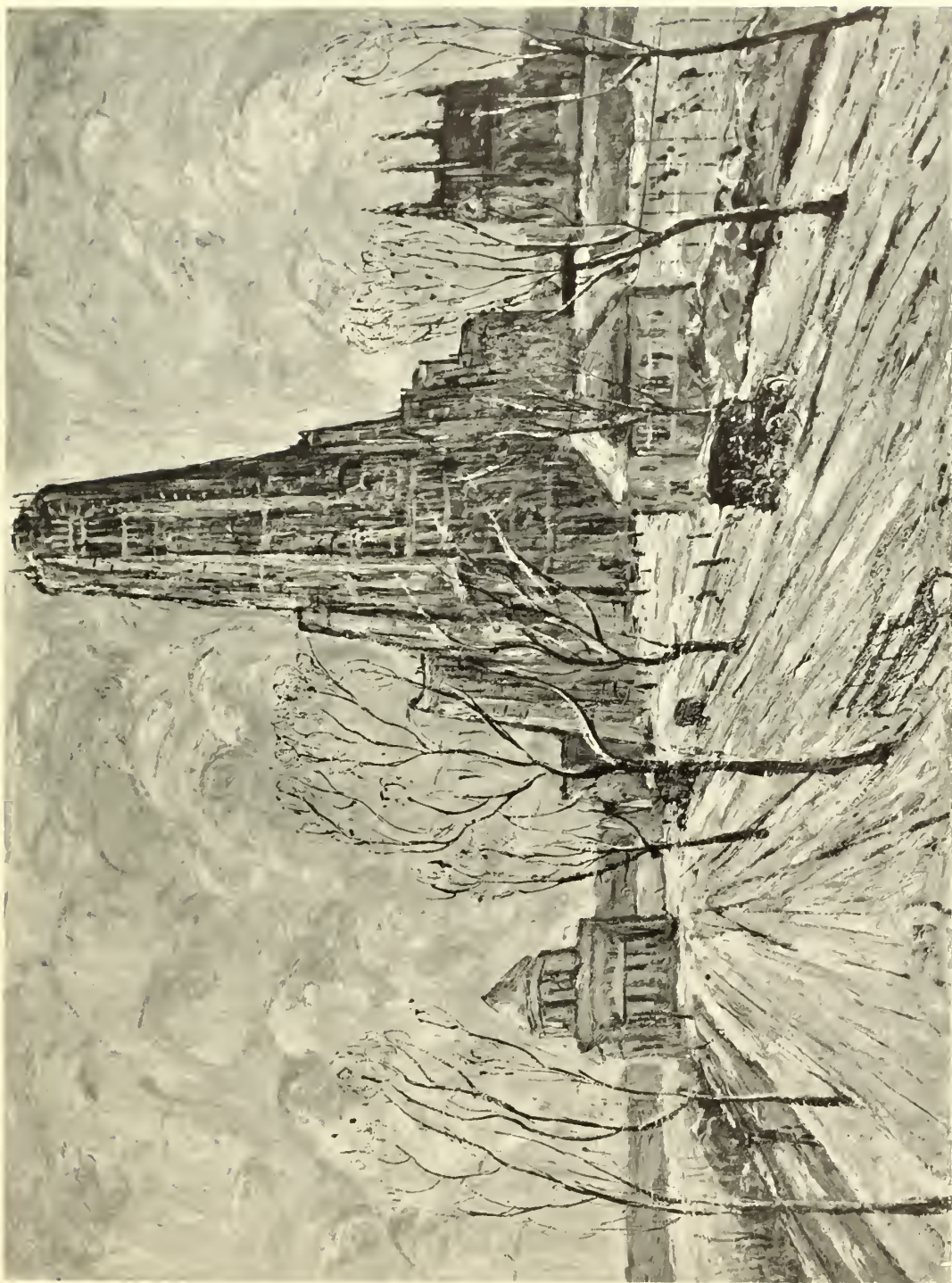
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RIVERSIDE CHURCH. 1930

h. 30 inches w. 40 inches

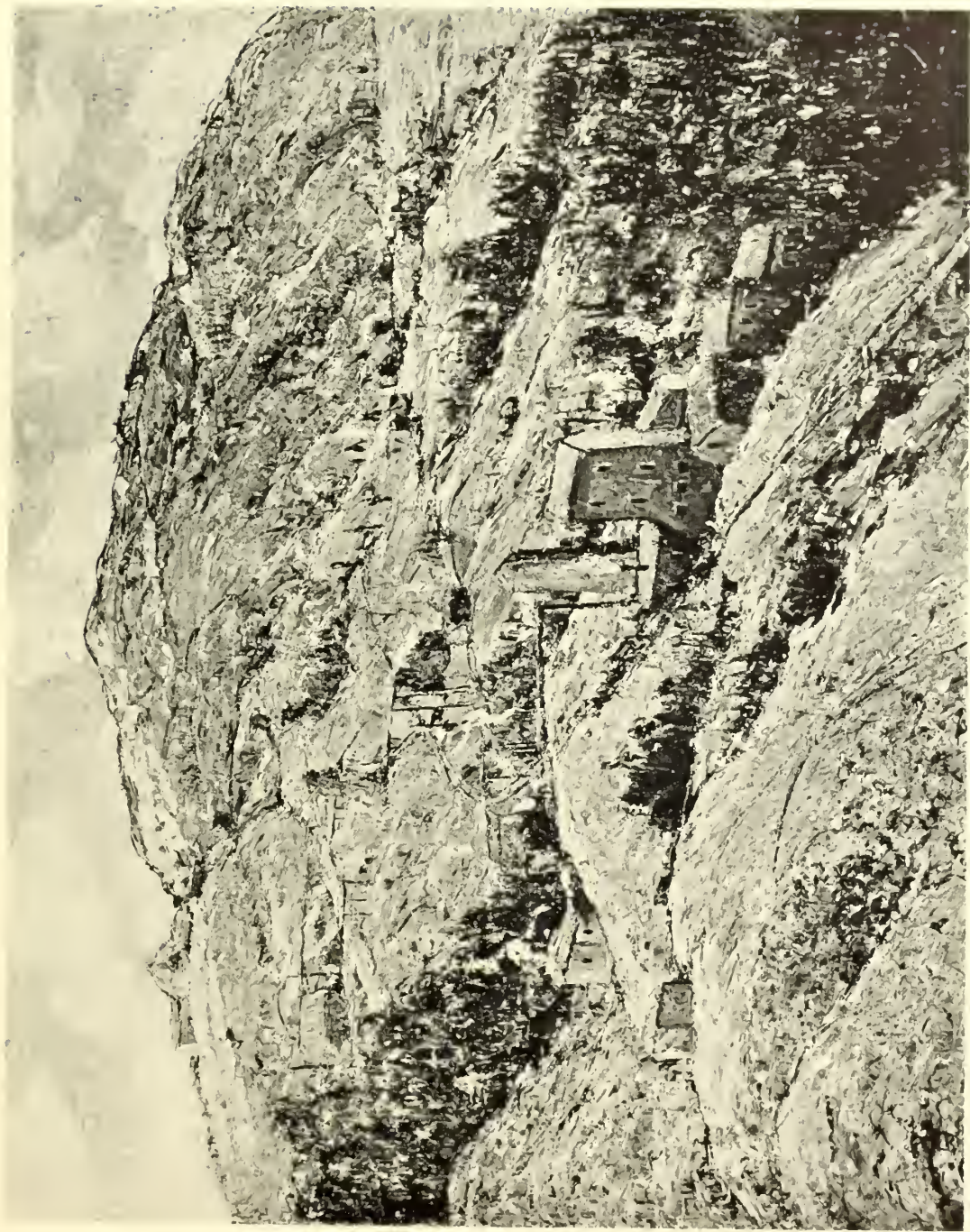
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DESERTED GOLD MINE, CRIPPLE CREEK, 1929

h. 10 inches w. 50 inches

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END OF DAY, 1928

h. 24 inches w. 30 inches

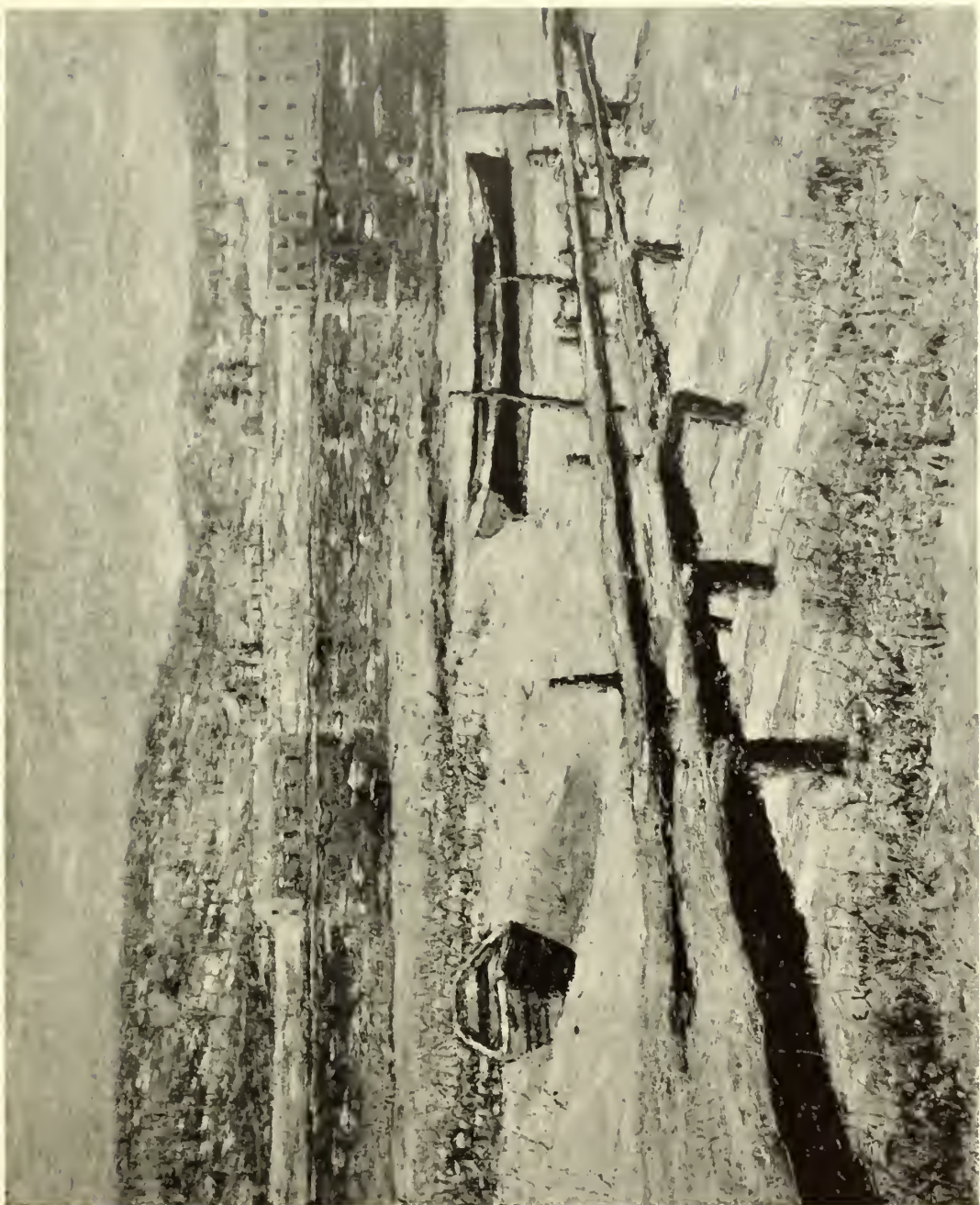
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WINTER ON THE RIVER, 1927

h. 33 inches w. 40 inches

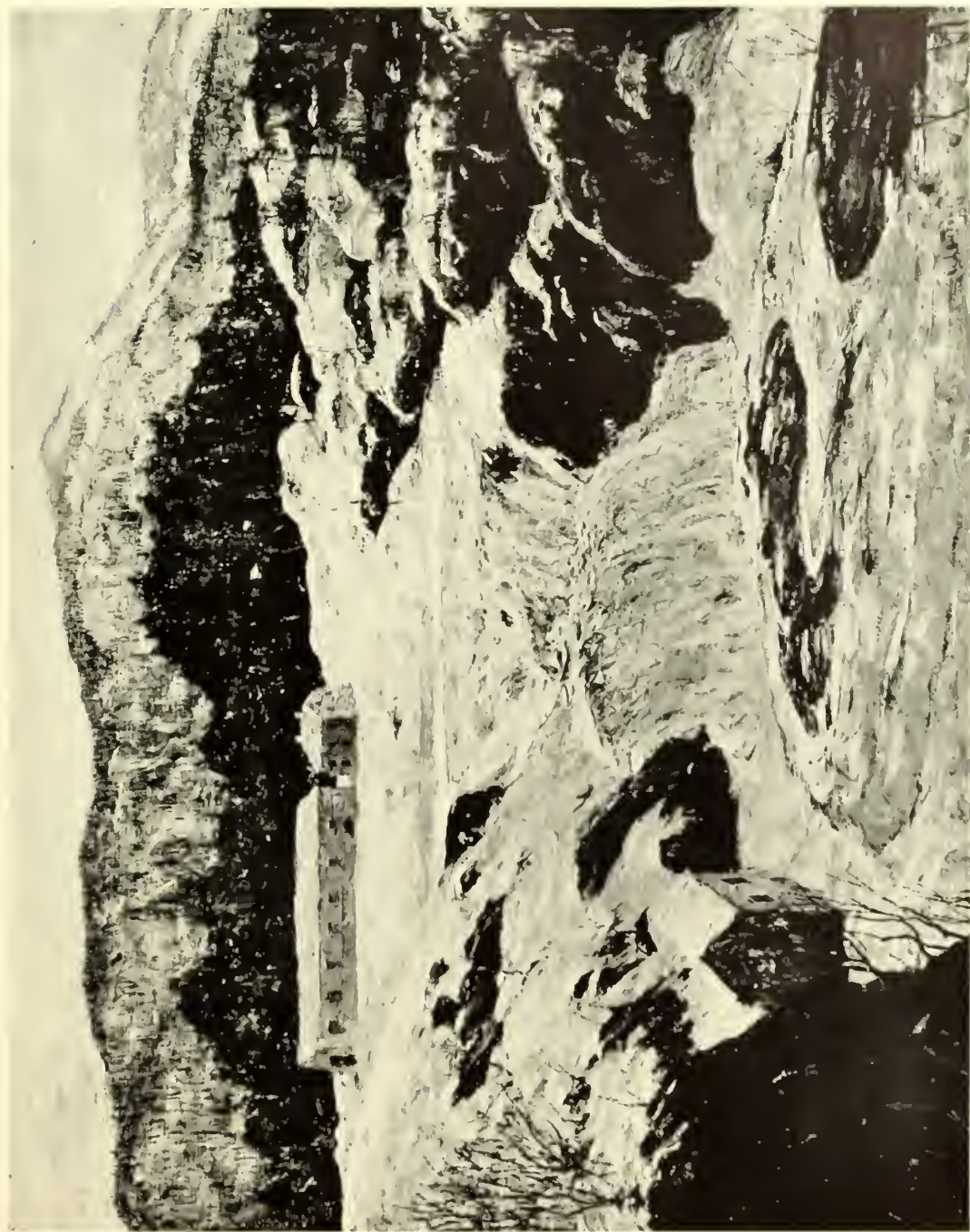
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ICE BOUND FALLS, 1919

h. 39½ inches w. 50 inches

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VANISHING MIST, 1919

h. 40 inches w. 50 inches

*Collection of Carnegie Institute
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HILLS AT INWOOD, 1918

h. 30 inches w. 40 inches

*Collection of Mr. Ferdinand Howald
Columbus, Ohio*

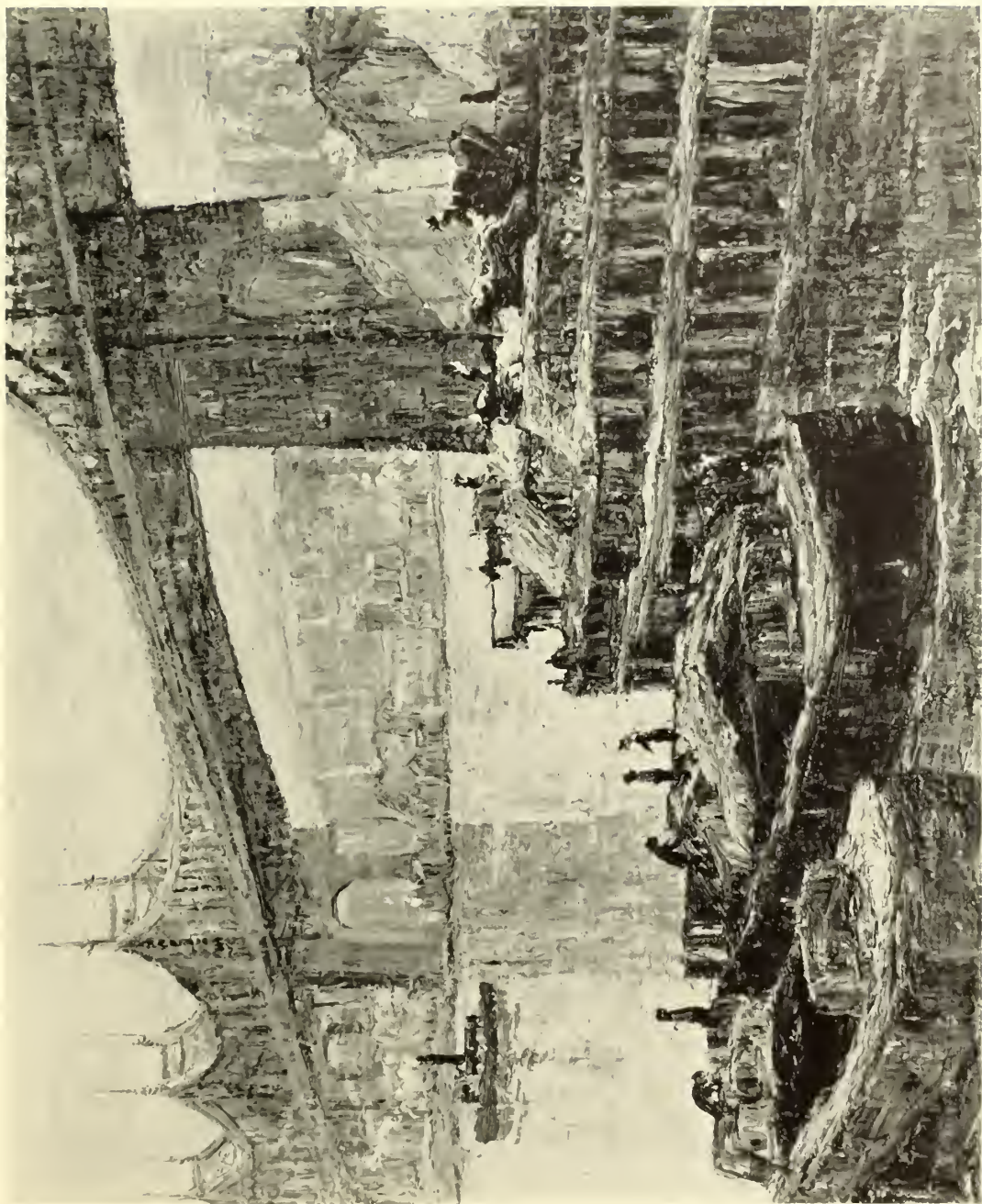


QUEENSBORO BRIDGE, 1918

h. 21 inches w. 30 inches

Collection of Mr. Frank Crowninshield

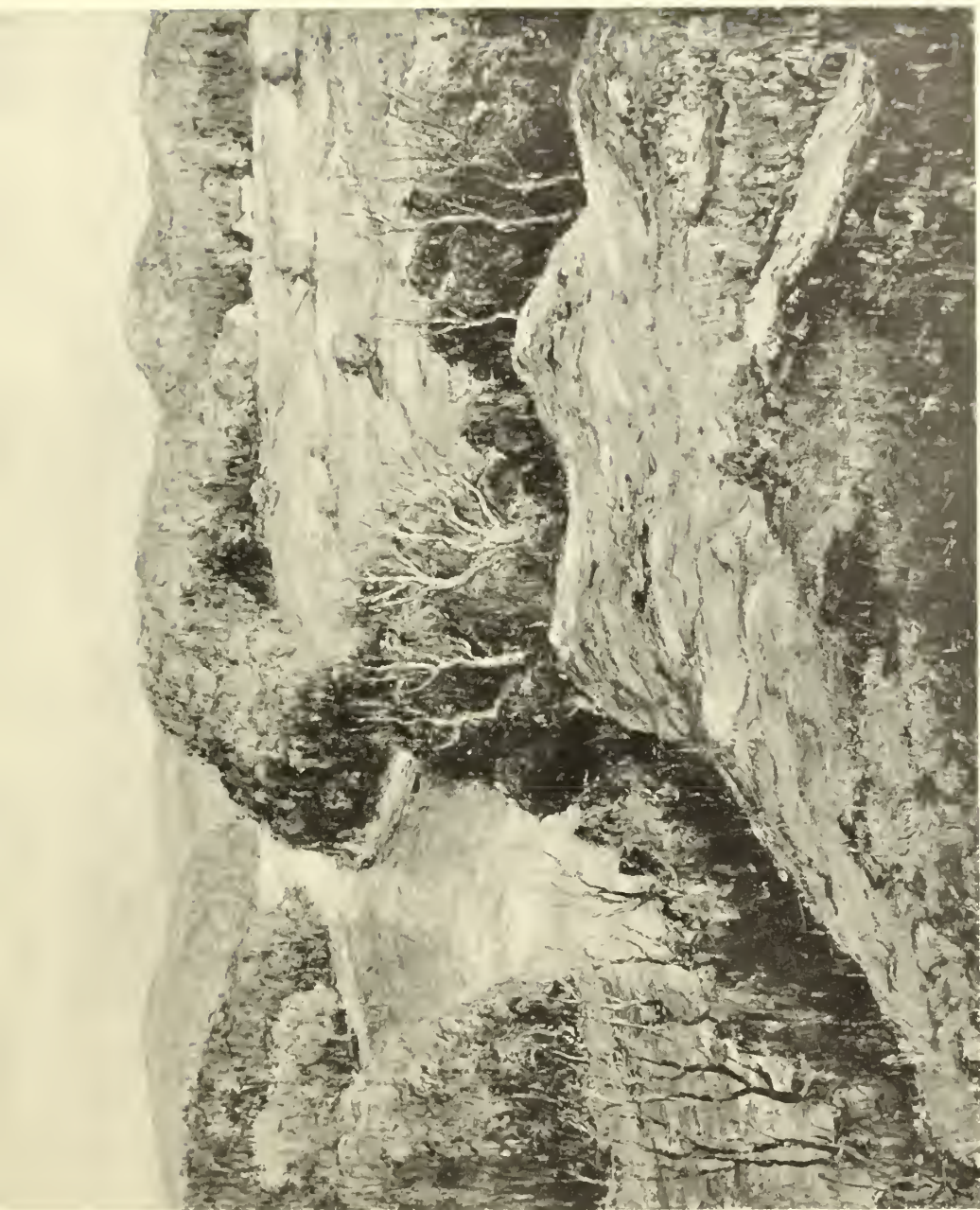
New York



AUTUMN, 1917

h. 25 inches w. 40 inches

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New York*



CATHEDRAL, SEGOVIA, SPAIN, 1916

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches

Private Collection



SQUATTERS HUTS—HARLEM RIVER, 1915

h. 20 inches w. 24 inches

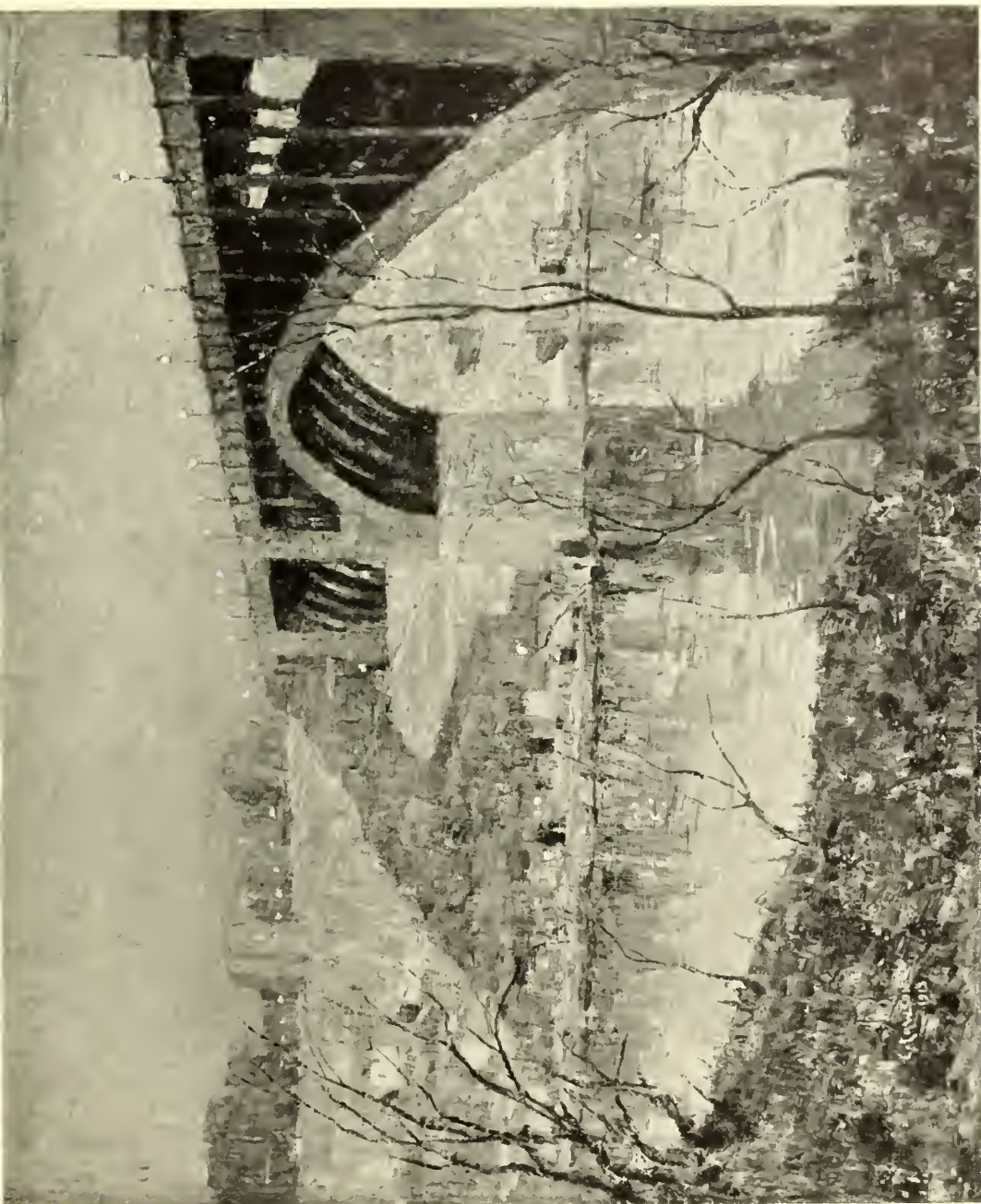
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SPRING EVENING, HARLEM RIVER, 1913

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches

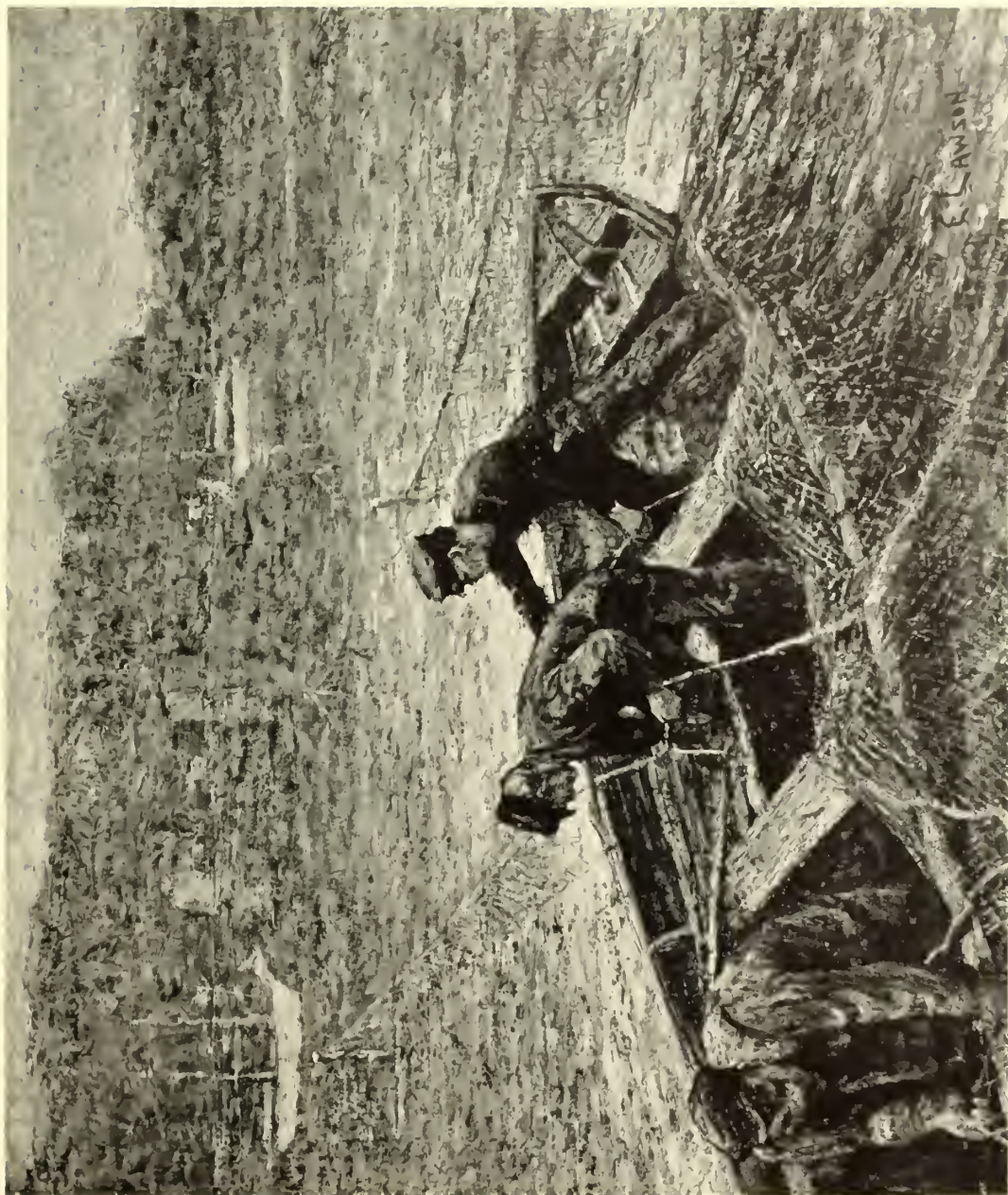
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FISHERMEN, 1911

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches

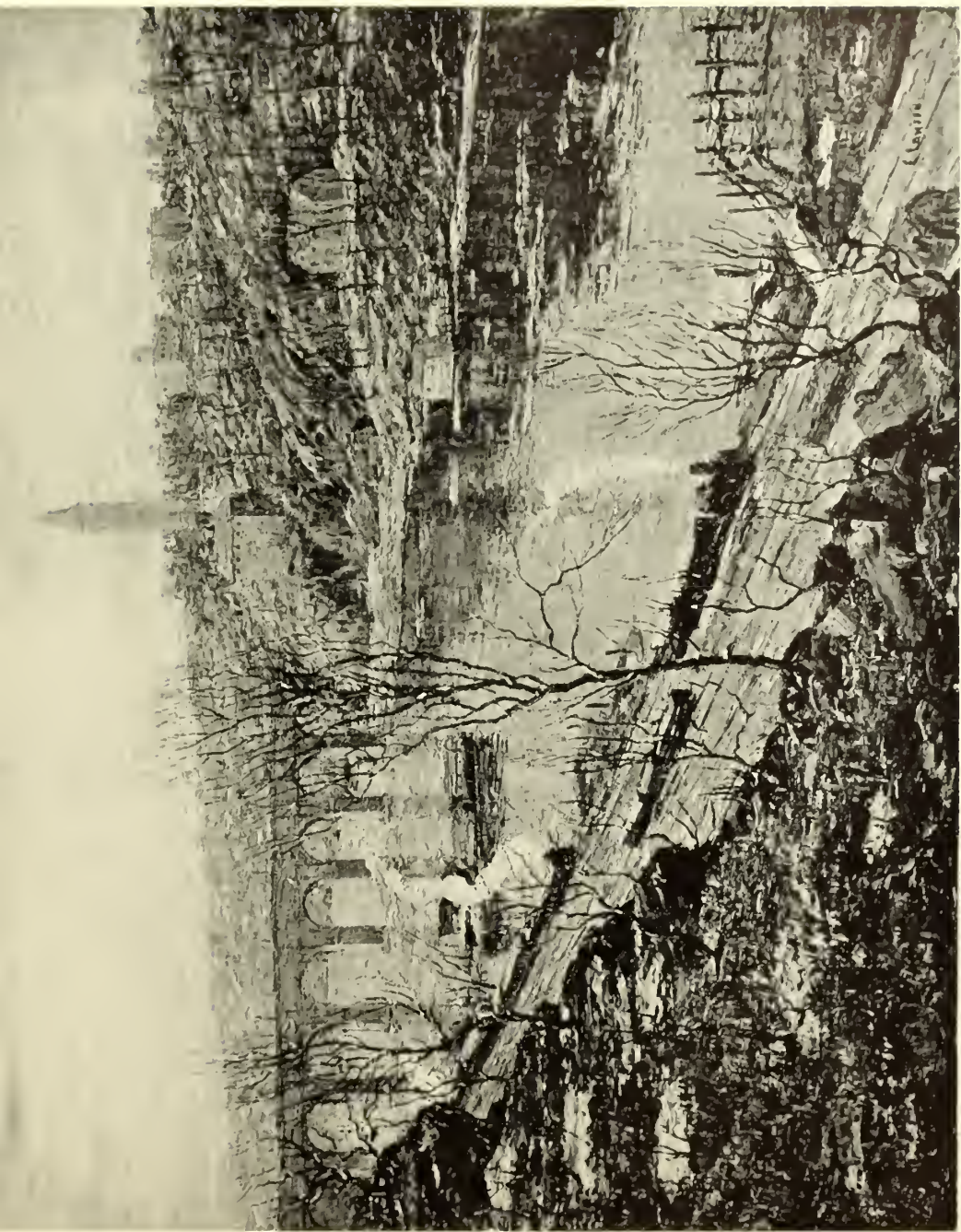
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HARLEM RIVER AT HIGH BRIDGE, 1910

h. 40 inches w. 50 inches

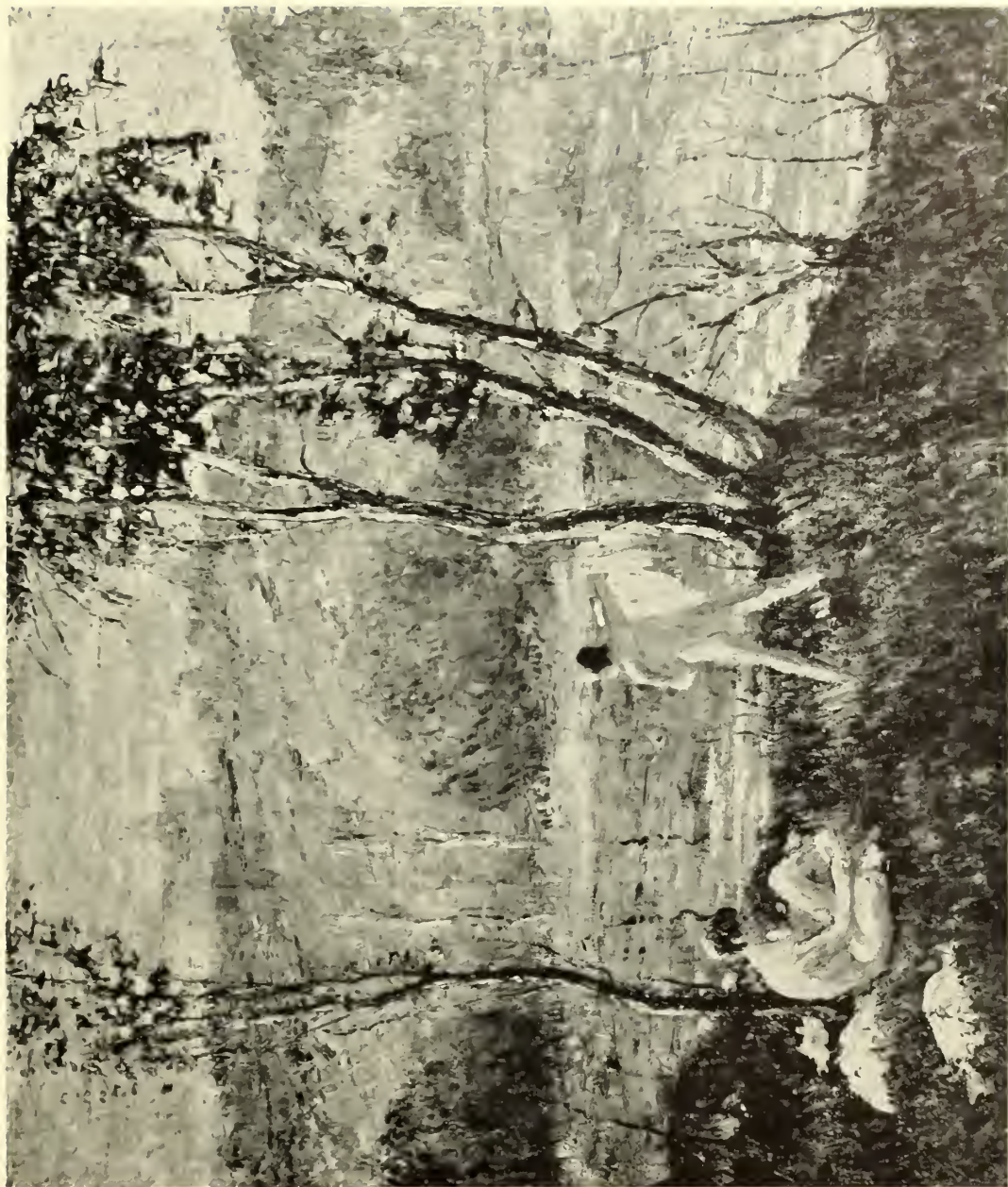
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SPRING, 1910

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches

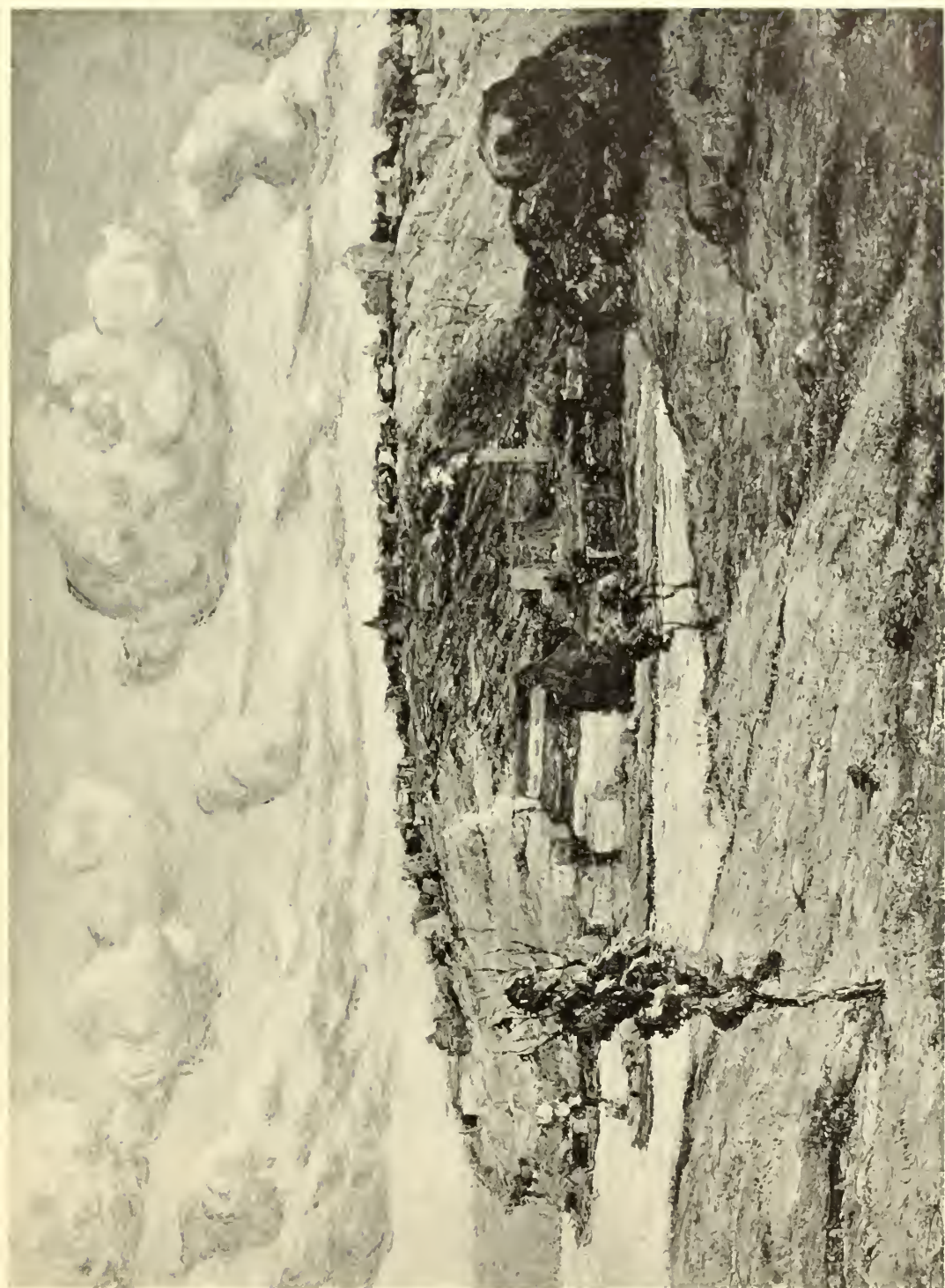
Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art



SHADOWS, SPUYTEN DUYVIL HILL, 1910

h. 30 inches w. 40 inches

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AQUEDUCT AT LITTLE FALLS, NEW JERSEY, 1906

h. 25 inches w. 30 inches

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